

March 8, 2023

To Members of the Education Committee

RE: HB 6842 – AAC THE ESTABLISHMENT OF LOCAL FOOD FOR SCHOOLS INCENTIVE PROGRAM  
AND EXPANSION OF THE CT GROWN FOR CT KIDS GRANT PROGRAM

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Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, and Connecticut General Assembly members of the Education Committee. We are faculty members at University of Connecticut, building research, teaching and outreach programs related to local food systems. Today, we are writing to provide informational background and context to HB 6842: An Act Concerning the Establishment of a Local Food for Schools Incentive Program and Expansion of The CT Grown for CT Kids Grants Program.

As you know, research suggests that when students eat a nutritious lunch they do better in school, both in terms of educational outcomes and behavior. Over the past 9 months, the University of Connecticut has been conducting a research project with CT School Food Authorities (SFAs) whose primary responsibility is serving nutritious meals to students. This research project is conducted in partnership with CT Dept. of Agriculture with support from the CT Farm to School Collaborative. In a survey of 145 SFAs we found that 101 have purchased local food in the last year. However, most are not purchasing directly from producers. In follow-up interviews we learned that this was partially due to concerns about fund availability. Federal funds are available to purchase regional produce through the USDA's wholesale produce procurement contract (DoD Fresh Program, currently managed by a vendor in New Jersey). Funds are not available to purchase directly from producers in Connecticut. At the same time SFAs suggested that the produce they got directly from Connecticut producers was fresher and of higher quality than what was available from their large food distributors. 96% of those buying directly from CT producers were interested in purchasing more, and 68% of those not currently buying directly from producers were interested in starting. One of the top challenges SFAs identified in purchasing local food was cost, and 49% of respondents stated that funding for locally purchased products would facilitate their ability to increase local procurement. 97% of all respondents were interested in trying to create new menu items that incorporate CT-grown items, especially berries, herbs, carrots, lettuce and snap/green beans.

In addition to our research, UConn is also implementing an education and outreach program with school districts that have pledged to serve local food in their cafeterias. In SY22-23 there are 27 public school districts that are participating in our 'Put Local On Your Tray Program.' UConn Extension works closely with these districts to leverage any event that includes local food -- such as a taste test or including local food as an ingredient on the lunch menu -- as an opportunity to teach students using fun activity booklets about seasonality, to help them discover where food comes from, and to expand their understanding of the cultural relevance of food. We currently organize this work by seasonal promotional campaigns, including 'The Crunch Challenge' (featuring apples, pears, cranberries), 'Rooting for Winter' (highlighting carrots, beets, potatoes), 'The Great Smoothie Challenge' (promoting strawberries, blueberries, and yogurt in early summer), 'Dip Into Summer' (encouraging raw veggie sticks dipped into hummus or ranch dressing), and From This Land: Native American Foodways. Our work can be viewed at <https://putlocalonyourtray.uconn.edu/>. It is worth noting that while farm-to-school efforts continue to expand in K-12 settings, there is new emerging work focused on early childhood (ages 0-5) that is also gaining momentum in our state, in part due to efforts at the Dept. of Public Health.

In partnership with the CT Dept. of Agriculture, we have provided grant coaching support to individuals, farmers, non-profits, and school districts interested in applying to the CT Grown for CT Kids Grants Program. The majority of clients seeking our coaching assistance were committed to building a farm-to-school program and were looking for seed funding to get started. We have also seen grantee cohorts build their own community of practice, sharing tips and best practices with each other. After two funding cycles it is apparent that the demand for this program far exceeds funding available for proposals. This state grants program is very similar to grants now offered in VT, Maine, and MA. The max funding level for CT's granting program is \$25,000 and there are several microgrant categories with a max of \$5,000. There is a larger federal grant opportunity of up to \$100,000 (USDA-FNS Farm to School Grants Program), however there is a very high administrative burden to apply and implement these awards, and there is tremendous national competition such that we have never seen more than three awards come to CT in any federal fiscal year. CT Dept. of Agriculture and CT Dept. of Public Health are two of our state agencies that have successfully applied for and been awarded federal funds, along with a handful of school districts.

We are grateful for your time reviewing this testimony.